

No plant ignites the spirit of the holiday season quite like a poinsettia. The vivid color and festive shape bring warmth to a household whose garden has retreated into winter dormancy. At the Rio Grande Botanic Garden, 1600 poinsettias are carefully cultivated, tended and elevated to the status of premier winter plant, forming a flood of blazing color and the ultimate in holiday grandeur.

Primarily noted for their vibrant coloration, poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) are native to the tropics of Central America and were once cultivated by the Aztecs. In their natural habitat, poinsettias burst to heights of ten feet and live for decades. First brought to the U.S. in the 1800s, poinsettias are now a holiday staple, and their sale is a multi million-dollar industry.

The large, colorful parts of the poinsettia are not the petals of the flower. They are bracts, or modified leaves. The often-overlooked flowers are small, yellow and found in the center of the bracts. A close look reveals a marvel of intricate blossoms.

While the most common bract color is red, poinsettias also appear in shades of pink, salmon, plum and white. Visitors to the Rio Grande Botanic Garden will discover all of these hues and even poinsettias in ethereal colors of blue and silver. These colors were created with floral paint sprayed on white bracts.

In a season of thankfulness and gift giving, the poinsettia is one of nature's finest presents. If you receive the gift of nature this year, consider keeping the spirit of the holiday alive all year-round. Despite their reputation as a difficult plant, poinsettias can be maintained through the year even by novice gardeners. All it takes is following a few simple steps.

First, take care when purchasing a poinsettia. Look for a bushy shape and bracts that are fully colored and without green streaks. As poinsettias react poorly to temperature extremes, do not buy a plant displayed by a store's entrance where chilling winter air can blow in. Once at home, keep your poinsettia away from drafty windows and heater vents.

Poinsettias are very forgiving when it comes to water. If the leaves and bracts look droopy, just give the plant a drink, and it will quickly recover.

Once the holidays pass and the poinsettia's leaves have completely fallen, water it sparingly until new leaves appear. In late May, the poinsettia can be moved outside and fertilized regularly. In August, prune the poinsettia to half its size to encourage branching. At this time, bring the plant back indoors.

Beginning in October, poinsettias need at least eight hours of total darkness each day. A dark period of 12-14 hours is even better. An easy way to do this is to place the plant in a completely dark closet or under a box when arriving home from work. Take it out of the dark when you leave in the morning. This way, the poinsettia will do its photosynthesizing work while you are at your desk doing yours. Continue this process

for at least thirty days or until the bracts turn color. As a reward for your careful work, the poinsettia should be fully colored by Thanksgiving.

If the system of controlling the periods of light and darkness sounds too daunting, skip it altogether, and your poinsettia will have full color by Valentine's Day instead.

At the Rio Grande Botanic Garden, an entire greenhouse is devoted to the autumn regimen of caring for 1600 poinsettias. The horticulture staff carefully combines the traditional method of light suppression with rigorous fertilization, calcium chloride treatments and strategic temperature fluctuations in order to maintain the beautiful specimens. The fruits of their labor are displayed en masse in the botanic garden showroom and are placed in the Mediterranean Conservatory and throughout the aquarium.

The poinsettias are just the beginning of the botanical holiday displays. Whimsical ivy topiaries in the shape of bells, sea lions and penguins decorate the gardens. White fir (*Abies concolor*) and Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga mensiesii*) trees have been decorated for Christmas along with 36 giant wreaths. Young visitors will adore the life size polar bear created entirely with plant material. The bear's fur is made of fluffy pampas grass, the nose is covered with larkspur seeds, and the deep brown eyes are made of coffee grounds. All of these spectacular plants accompany the River of Lights holiday display.

Now through December 30 from 6-9 p.m the annual River of Lights holiday display is open. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$2 for children. Visit the Albuquerque BioPark's Web site at [www.cabq.gov/biopark](http://www.cabq.gov/biopark) for a full list of events. The display is closed Christmas Eve and Christmas Night.

December 3, 10, 17 from 6: -7:30p.m. visit the Botanic Garden Education Building during River of Lights and make gifts inspired by nature, such as seashell tree ornaments, pinecone reindeer, and nature magnets. Free for all ages.

December 12: National Poinsettia Day.

The Rio Grande Botanic Garden, 2601 Central N.W., is open daily from 9a.m.-5p.m. General admission: \$7 for adults; \$3 for children and seniors.

The Albuquerque Biological Park consists of the Rio Grande Botanic Garden, Albuquerque Aquarium and Rio Grande Zoo, and is a division of the city's Cultural Services department. The Albuquerque BioPark is an accessible facility. The BioPark is closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day. For information, call 764-6200, TTY at 764-6297.